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# The Remains of an Aboriginal Encampment at Rehoboth Delaware

*of the remains of an aboriginal encampment. Feb. 5, 1880,  
made before the Anthropological Society of America.*

MR. PRESIDENT AND MEMBERS OF THE SOCIETY :—

I have the pleasure of submitting to the society some notes of an examination of the remains of an aboriginal encampment at Rehoboth, a watering-place on the coast of Delaware, five miles south of the venerable town of Lewes, about 130 miles from Philadelphia, and nineteen miles from Cape May, from which it lies diagonally opposite.

Twenty-one years have elapsed since my first visit to this interesting spot, and, although I have made several subsequent visits, the only favorable opportunity of making a careful investigation occurred during the summer of 1879.

Twelve years ago there was no visible habitation within five miles of it, unless we except a rough plank shed erected by the fraternity of sportsmen as a shelter during the autumn shooting season. Since then a veritable city by the sea has sprung up, almost in a night, and bids fair to outstrip many of its older and better known rivals.

Directly in the rear of what is now called Rehoboth Beach, and distant from the sea not over five hundred feet, stretch out these interesting remains, than which, so far as I have been able to ascertain, no similar example of an encampment possessing the same archæological value exists on the Atlantic seaboard; and these features have been preserved by reason of its comparative inaccessibility and remoteness from the haunts of men combined with remarkable natural defenses. As compared with other similarly situated localities, the topographical changes have been trivial, and, if any, have been produced by the winter gales and not by the sea, as the ocean currents that

set in along this part of Delaware are known to have maintained their one unvaried course north and south for almost a century, and thus prevented any encroachments upon the coast line. The tremendous force of these winds is evidenced by an immense sand dune that has been blown up between the cape and Lewes, and which annually recedes inward several inches, burying in its course great pines, whose withered tops emerge from the apex in a long line, like so many spectres of a departed race.

I have not discovered any records of the existence of an encampment at Rehoboth, either in the Historical Society of Delaware or in the histories of the early settlements of that State, by which to form some estimate of its antiquity, but from the evidences to be adduced it is probable its establishment antedated the arrival of the whites many years, perhaps many centuries.

We know that in April, 1638, the ship of war *Key* of Calmar entered the mouth of the Delaware bearing the first colony of Swedish settlers to the New World, under the leadership of Peter Menewe. As narrated by Acrelius, they made their first landing on the western side of the river, at a place called by them Paradise Point, in the neighborhood of what is now Lewes, and immediately purchased land from the Indians, embracing a tract of country from Cape Henlopen to the falls called Santickau (Trenton Falls), and all the country inland. The Swedish historian does not mention any extensive Indian settlement in the vicinity.

The present dimensions of the encampment are, in length, three-quarters of a mile, running in a direct line north and south, parallel with and, as I have said, distant from the ocean some four or five hundred feet, and protected from it by a sand bluff rising six or eight feet above high-water mark, and extending from Rehoboth Beach to Cape Henlopen. The width of the encampment varies from one hundred to five hundred feet. A ridge of sand-hills intersects its length, dividing it into nearly equal parts, and as the southern section is on a higher plane, the two form what might be called an upper and a lower encampment.

Lying a quarter of a mile south stretches out the famous

Rehoboth Bay, once the habitation of clams and oysters, and whose shallow waters still teem with a great variety of fish and myriads of hard and shedder crabs. Skirting a portion of the westerly boundary we behold one of those phenomenal freaks of nature rarely met with on our coast, namely, three lakes whose waters are perfectly fresh and clear as any in our northern latitudes, although within a few hundred feet of the salt sea. The largest covers some fifty acres of land and has a mean depth of five feet. The quantity of water in each remains nearly the same in all seasons, the constant exhaustion from evaporation being supplied by hidden springs.


In selecting this spot as the site for an encampment the Indians displayed a keen appreciation of its unsurpassed natural advantages. It was simply an elysium. Here they had every comfort their savage natures could wish for. Game, fish and oyster in abundance and easily obtained. An inexhaustible supply of fresh water at their very threshold, and the adjacent forest of white oak harbored the deer and bear, furnished them with fuel and lumber to construct their sea canoe.

Hither for many centuries they annually came to escape the enervating heat of the inland villages, and probably remained far into the autumn, or until the geese and ducks, with which the bay and lakes are stocked at this period, deserted those placid waters for a warmer climate. Hence it is that I call this an encampment, in contradistinction to their permanent abiding places. The evidences of their sojourn—their domestic habits—are many, and even to the unscientific observer are unmistakable in the conclusions they point to. The character of the ground is in itself a revelation, and contributes to the belief that its level and compact surface—almost as solid as a macadamized road, whereon no vegetable growth is visible—is not entirely the result of nature's handiwork, but that the foot of man assisted in producing it. It seems to have been so pounded down by the tread of the successive generations of its periodical visitors that vegetation is rendered impossible, whereas one step across its limits brings you to a luxuriant growth of heather and such other grasses as usually flourish contiguous to the sea in this latitude, and springing from a soil into which the feet sink several inches.

The inference is that the ground was prepared for the purposes of an encampment, and I doubt if even the most skeptical theorist could fail to recognize the force of these deductions. Scattered throughout its precincts at irregular intervals are the remains of several hundreds of what I shall call camp-fires—small conical elevations composed of clam, oyster and mussel shells mingled with charcoal. These mounds vary in size and in seeming entirety. Some appear to have successfully resisted the force of the elements and retained their original form almost intact, whilst others have partially succumbed to the wash of the winter tides that have occasionally gained access through apertures in the sand-bluffs and submerged a part of the surface. There are still others that have been entirely effaced from the same cause, and their positions are only distinguishable by the chalky appearance of the ground and the presence of myriads of broken shell that have bleached by centuries of exposure. In other localities where artificial shell heaps have been found, they have consisted of several large mounds, showing they were the accumulations of what we would popularly call "clam bakes," where the Indians repaired for a brief period for the express purpose of enjoying the succulent bivalves. One or two such mounds are to be seen on the flats which separate Lewes from the sea, and during the years 1865 and 1866 were casually examined by Professor Joseph Leidy, and described in the proceedings of the Academy of Natural Sciences.

At the Rehoboth encampment there are no large mounds, and presumably never have been, as the number and positions of those extant preclude such a supposition.

The positive evidence of their origin is found in the fact that in the immediate vicinity, as well as mingled with the mollusks, are fragments of pottery in large quantities, celts, arrow heads, and a variety of other stone implements and ornaments; the bones of animals and many pieces of calcined stone, that once played an important part in the construction of their long since extinct fire-places. Indeed, in almost every stone picked up within the confines of the camp-ground can be traced the fragment of an implement of domestic use, the



chase, or war. It should be borne in mind that stones are not an indigenous product of this part of Delaware, and, further, it has been asserted, perhaps a little ironically, that none are to be found within the boundary of Sussex County larger than an ordinary pebble.

Fragments of pottery are found in more or less quantities in all the mounds, and, notwithstanding the sherds are small,—the largest smaller than a man's hand,—they enable us to determine, with some degree of accuracy, the size and form of the vessel of which they originally formed a part. When we consider the early settlement of this portion of the country, and the knowledge we have that the Indians abandoned many of their primitive forms of domestic economy immediately upon coming in contact with the whites,—from whom they obtained utensils of iron,—we have reason to believe that these specimens are among the earliest types of aboriginal ceramic art, although they are identical with those found in other localities. The style of ornamentation is of the plainest description, and is confined to the incised lines running parallel with the rim of the pot, varying in number in accordance with the size, or the taste of the potter—some having as many as twelve lines and others only five and six. The exterior of all the larger and rougher fragments have the corrugated surface so often seen on Indian earthenware, and popularly supposed to have been executed with that primitive stylus, the corn-cob. That this belief had not been entirely relinquished, even by so eminent an archæologist as Professor Charles Rau, of the Smithsonian, is evidenced by his letter addressed to me under date of August 13, 1879, in which he states his intention to operate with corn-cobs upon wet clay, and promising to apprise me of the result of his experiments. This he did in a letter dated November 27, last, as follows:—

“A short time after I had written to you I experimented with corn-cobs on wet clay, and obtained very ornamental impressions, which, however, are unlike any marks I have seen on Indian pottery. I used,—

“ 1. A corn-cob with the grains in it.

“ 2. One without them.

"3. One without them, making impressions in different directions.

"After these trials, I have arrived at the conclusion that the Indians made no use of corn-cobs for ornamenting their pottery."

The most valuable specimen in my small collection is an almost perfect example of a celt. This interesting relic was excavated from a shell heap, where it had evidently been deposited for the purpose of concealment, and that part of its pointed end which bears the traces of exposure to the atmosphere protruded an inch above the ground. It measures about seven inches long by two and a half broad, is conical in shape, flatter on one side than on the other, and has a well-wrought cutting edge, whence the lines of the implement taper gracefully back to a blunt point. There is just sufficient polish remaining upon its pecked surface to show that it had once been covered with it. In one feature this specimen is unique, in that on its flattened side it has a carefully drilled depression for the thumb.

Hammer stones are found in comparative abundance in all parts of the ground, and are recognized by the finger-pits on one, and more frequently on both sides of the implement, although in some of the examples obtained from Rehoboth the depressions are so faintly defined as to escape the notice of the inexperienced collector. These tools are certainly the rudest types of aboriginal stone relics. They have been selected from the ordinary cobble-stone, and as no attempt has been made to alter their size or shape, they occur in an endless variety of forms, and their condition is generally battered and abraded with severe use.

Large quantities of flint chips and unfinished and broken arrow heads, as well as numerous perfect specimens, are to be found wherever a mound is to be seen, and lead to the opinion that the manufacture of these implements was largely engaged in by the camp dwellers. The prevailing form is confined to the triangular variety without the notched base, which distinguishes those usually obtained from Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

From another mound I dug up a good specimen of a flaking hammer or hand-axe, a broken pipe-stem of striped slate,



showing a perforation as well drilled as if executed with a steel instrument; a diminutive paint-pot, and a handful of bones. The latter, although lying close together in a little heap, have since been identified as those of two distinct mammals—the fragment of a humerus and upper ends of two ulna of dog and the vertebræ of a deer.

The hand-axe is a triangular shaped tool, wrought out of sandstone, five inches long and four inches at the base, and with the finger-pit of the previously described celt, but more rudely pecked out, and its cutting edge presents a broad and once sharp blade, admirably adapted for flaking other implements into shape. It possesses additional interest as showing the hard usage to which it has been subjected, one side of the blade being entirely battered off.

As to the paint pot, I at first attributed no other value to it than would attach to any ordinary fossil bivalve, out of which it has been picked; but a closer scrutiny revealed its identity, and I have since ascertained that it has many counterparts in the collection of the National Museum at Washington. It would not require a great stretch of the imagination to discern in the yellowish deposit in its interior particles of the pigment that once served to adorn the face of the red man.

In conclusion, I have only to express the regret that I have not been permitted to make as thorough an examination of the remains of this ancient Indian village as their value to archæology certainly entitles them to. My regret is intensified because of the very near approach of that time when there will be no further opportunity for research. Even as I write embryo streets traverse its domain in every direction, and in the space of, perhaps only a few months lofty hotels and comfortable cottages will rise upon the site of the Indian wigwam, and every trace of the aboriginal character of the spot will have disappeared before the march of improvement.





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